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ABSTRACT

Child care in New Zealand and Australia has become a crucial part of the child-rearing system, and most preschool children spend a prolonged period in at least one away-from-home environment for a substantial part of the day. Because so many preschool children are exposed to a child care environment before entering school, the transition from child care to primary school is interesting to consider. In numerous studies teachers report that day care graduates are more aggressive in their first year of school than home-reared children. However, teachers often fail to discriminate between assertive and aggressive behavior, and this distinction for child care graduates is important. Children in child care tend to have infrequent contact and short interactions with caregivers, causing them to be more skilled in areas of social competence, including assertion skills. Child care graduates may also experience more anxiety when interacting with strange adults than with strange peers, and some teachers may misinterpret this anxiety as communicative incompetence. For a smooth transition from child care to school, beginning grades need to provide a child-centered environment and beginning grades teachers need to ensure that children are offered adult interaction which stimulates an atmosphere of cooperation, coordination, and continuity. Contains 25 references. (MM)

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THE TRANSITION FROM CHILD CARE TO SCHOOL

First Years of School Conference
Auckland, New Zealand
January 15-18, 1991

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Child care in both New Zealand and Australia has become a crucial part of the child rearing system over the past decade or so. It is seen, for a number of reasons, as a supplement to, rather than as a substitute for, parental care. (Caldwell, 1987). In Australia, child care is here to stay; it is a demographic necessity and the following quote, although North American in origin, describes the Australian situation most aptly:

"It has become a crucial service to many parents", "Good child care is crucial to women's liberation", "Coming out (against day care centres) now would be like coming out against the automobile", "Child care is now and will continue to be a necessity for America's economy, its families and its children", "Day care is a fact of modern life, no longer a debatable issue".

(Blum, 1983:2)

In Australia the 1980's saw some historic developments affecting the structure of the labour force, the most significant being the number of women with children under preschool age who returned to the work force in full time or part time employment.

The two largest employed groups in 1989 were married women aged 25-34 years and 35-44 years; (they increased by 29% and 40% respectively), and 75% of these women had dependent children. (Maas, 1990).

It follows then that child care looms as a major issue for thousands of Australian families in the workforce; 88,000 used formal services either centre based or FDC schemes, a further 84,000 used kindergartens and 254,000 used informal arrangements, according to the ABS 1987.

While I am unaware of the demographic trends affecting the early childhood field in New Zealand it is obvious that the notion of "educare", that is, the concept of providing education and care in the same program, is one that permeates the new early childhood services recently announced. Anne Meade, on a visit to Australia in 1990 described it as follows :

"New Zealand is in the midst of knitting a new early childhood care and education 'sweater'. In fact, it is in the middle of making a new set of educational clothes". (Meade, 1990:1).

She pointed out that since 1986 all schools and early childhood services have been the responsibility of the same government department; in other words, preschool education and child care have a shared focus. Services which had their charter approved were able to receive government subsidies for up to thirty hours per week, thus ensuring that predominantly child care, as opposed to sessional programs, would receive greater financial support from the government than it had in the past. The

response has been obvious when you read in the NZCER Newsletter of reports describing the growing number of infants and toddlers being enrolled in children's centres in the Auckland and Wellington regions and the substantial waiting lists at these centres.

It would appear then, on both sides of the Tasman, that more attention is being paid to the notion of child care and the effects on a young child of prolonged exposure to a child care program. Given that day care is a popular issue, it is also an emotional one, and one that tends to polarise people. Advocates for day care argue that it is a positive experience for children in terms of their physical, social, emotional and cognitive development, while detractors of day care argue just as vociferously that it is the final result in the process of abandonment of children by the narcissistic "me" generation and is a prime example of parents abdicating their parental role with a consequent undermining of the family and the introduction of a socialistic way of raising children. (Blum, 1983).

Notwithstanding these two polarised views child care is full of complexities, ambiguities and ironies due to the very nature of its existence; it must serve the needs of young children, the needs of their parents, the needs of the caregivers in the centre as well as the needs of the community at large - all at the same time. This process would not be so difficult, or unusual, except that the needs and aspirations of all these parties are often in conflict.

Clarke-Stewart (1982) has suggested that while changing values within the community encourage female parents to return to the workforce, the move towards smaller nuclear, or single parent families, has imposed new challenges and new stresses on all these parties and the increased reliance on child care reflects these changes and related stresses. Caldwell (1987) has argued that child care, in our contemporary society, can make an important contribution to socialising young children into the mores and values of the culture and because of this child care per se deserves as much attention as other traditionally recognised social systems such as the family, the educational system, the political system and the church.

She continues her case by arguing that :

"If an anthropologist from another planet came to earth today and wrote a typical ethnographic description of child rearing on almost any part of the planet, the narrative would have to read something like this:

'The children are reared partly in their homes and partly in little enclaves of children of approximately the same age. Some of these enclaves are very small, only four or five children. Some are medium-sized, 30-40 children, some are huge, 150 to 200 children. As the children address the adults rather formally, they are apparently not related to them. The children spend a significant portion of their time in these centres, and a great deal of the teaching and learning that transpires during the early years takes place in those settings'".

(Caldwell, 1987:viii)

While you may or may not agree with every point in that quote it is irrefutable that children who are enrolled in day care in the English speaking world have been closely scrutinised over the past decade or so; they have been "observed, compared, tested, scrutinised, and measured. Unfortunately, they are too young to have been interviewed about their experiences". (Blum, 1983:3). This somewhat tongue in cheek comment serves to point up the fact that a great deal of research, both quantitative and qualitative, has been generated about the development of children in a child care centre; we are able to define with reasonable certainty the determinants of "quality" care and we are able to mount a cogent argument against the various myths about child care that surface from time to time. For instance New Zealand members of the audience will be aware of the statement in Education to be More (1988) which listed the then, three major myths about early care and education, and I quote:

- "1. That it is bad for the child to be separated from the mother;
2. that providing early child care and education services will encourage mothers to go to work;
3. that children's services contribute to the breakdown of families by removing their key responsibility for child rearing". (pp 11-12)

Let us leave the myths and dwell on some facts; firstly, most children of preschool age spend a prolonged period of time in at least one away-from-home environment for a substantial part of the day; secondly, many children of preschool age spend a prolonged period of time in more than one away from home environment, e.g. centre based or family day care, as well as kindergarten; thirdly, at this stage of a child's development it is often difficult to isolate the effects of home and child care or kindergarten on a child's development, although this is the main thrust of many research studies; fourthly, many research studies on children who have attended some form of preschool in USA and Britain are using data from disadvantaged children, e.g. Head Start or EPA program children; fifthly, most research studies on children who have attended centre based care in USA are using data from recognised "high quality" centres such as university campus centres; and sixthly, some studies, particularly in the UK, have endeavoured to look at the effects of various programs and compare them, e.g. comparing nursery schools with nursery classes, play groups with day nurseries, and so on. (Osborn & Milbank, 1987, Clark, 1988); and finally, those children who have attended child care programs for up to five years, move, eventually, into the primary school.

The process of transition is a normal one; a child's life is made up of a chain of transitions and successful adaptation to any transition is bound up with a number of variables including the child's previous experiences, the smoothness or otherwise of the transition and the degree of similarity or difference between the previous place and the new one. It is interesting to consider that the transition from kindergarten to primary school, and the move from primary school to secondary school have

received much attention from researchers and practitioners over the years with a view to making each of these transitions as smooth - and as productive - as possible. This is an acknowledgment of the fact that the transition process is not a single "one off" event but rather a complex process that subsumes a number of different events and points of view (Blatchford et al, 1982) as well as acknowledging that the child's continuing adjustment to the new situation may well be decided at the transition point. It seems important, therefore, to look at some of the literature which is relevant to teachers who take responsibility for the transition of child care graduates into the primary school.

It is acknowledged that children in child care tend to have infrequent contact and short interactions with caregivers. (Blatchford et al, 1982). It is also acknowledged that much of this interaction could be defined as "managerial", "helping", "disciplinary" or concerned with comforting the child and only a very small proportion of the interaction could be construed to be "educational". This, to me, reflects the difficulties faced by teachers and caregivers in trying to distribute their time equally and comprehensively over all the children in the group. The flip side of this situation is that the children spend a great deal of time interacting with their peers and Clark (1988) would have us believe that there is great potential for learning in such situations. For instance Hartup and Moore (1990) argue that it is only in interactions with age mates which provide children with the opportunity to negotiate, thereby producing knowledge by means of consensus rather than by means of compliance, as is the case when interacting with adults.

Obviously as adults are older, and in the main, wiser than children, they can control the interactions with children, notwithstanding that adults can provide children with a great deal of information about the world and the way it operates. This is what Blatchford et al were referring to when they bemoaned the lack of "educational" interaction between adults and children in group settings. It could be argued then, that children who spend prolonged periods in a child care setting could lack cognitive "matters of fact" when compared with their at home peers, but they might also be more skilled in areas of social competence including negotiating and assertion skills. Obviously exposure to peers should lead to subsequent increases in social interaction skills but Roopnarine (1985) has suggested that these skills may not lead to an increase in positive social behaviour but to negative behaviour as well. The position is exacerbated by the work of Hegland and Rix (1990) who have determined that many teachers of children in the beginning grade of school can not, or do not, differentiate between assertive and aggressive behaviour.

They report that in numerous studies teachers have rated day care graduates as more aggressive in their first year of school than home reared children. The data were generated from teachers' ratings but when researchers used direct observations they reported that day care children display higher frequencies of social behaviours than do home reared children - but - and this is the important point, these children did not display higher percentages of aggressive behaviour than their stay at home peers.

Hegland and Rix argue that the differences between the teachers' ratings and the observation studies may be due to the fact that the teachers may be confounding children's active, assertive and aggressive behaviour. It would appear that on many occasions teachers fail to discriminate between assertive and aggressive behaviour. Assertive acts have been defined as non-hostile, prosocial acts which involve self-expression and self-enhancement without violating the rights and feelings of others, in contrast to aggressive acts which attempt to achieve goals at the expense of others.

This distinction between assertive and aggressive behaviour when applied to child care graduates is an important one; for instance, children with experience in defending possessions and in negotiating rights with peers in particular may display more assertiveness as well as more aggression; after all, they will probably have had more practice in the group setting. However it follows that teachers may construe these responses as aggressive, mainly because they may be seen to be flaunting the social convention of obedient conformity at school.

A further thought might be that many teachers may prefer, in fact, submissive children to assertive children, although it should be noted that most of the studies in this area which were quoted by Hegland and Rix have used "assertive" and "aggressive" as synonymous terms. At this point it should be recognised that research has isolated a group of child care graduates who do exhibit more aggressive, hostile behaviour than their peers. Howes (1990) has suggested that there is a link between aggressive behaviour and prolonged attendance at a low quality child care centre in which the children have probably spent more of their time aimlessly wandering within a large group and/or competing with their peers for adult attention. While this fact is a cause for great concern in the early childhood field Howes further argues that there is a growing consensus in the literature that child care quality and family characteristics are related.

Parents of children with insecure maternal attachments tend more to enrol them in child care settings with low adult-child ratios than do parents with secure maternal attachments. More stressed parents, with less than optimal child-rearing-values and practices, tend to place their children in lower quality child care. This is a "Catch 22" situation as high quality child care can serve as a family support and assist in the reduction of stress. As well as being rated more hostile at school these children from low-quality care have been observed to be less competent in peer play at school. This is a significant observation as it has been argued that one of the positive outcomes of time in child care is the advanced form of interactive play and co-operative behaviour. (Harper and Huie, 1985).

Obviously this "plus" and others, is governed by the quality of experiences offered to the child in the centre. Harper and Huie expand on this idea somewhat to suggest that "moderate exposure" to child care will enable children to develop coping routines which enable them to adjust more easily to the new environment (of preschool), whereas children who have had infrequent or excessive exposure to

substitute care will tend to be less well equipped to cope with separation and adjustment to the new setting and will therefore engage in more solitary and parallel play. While we can extrapolate from this work with preschoolers to suggest that some moderate exposure to child care would have a similar effect on children entering school we have no knowledge of what might constitute "moderate exposure".

A further point for consideration has been put forward by Blum (1983) who argues that child care graduates experience more anxiety when interacting with strange adults than when interacting with strange peers. The implications of this for adjustment to school are obvious; teachers tend to regard children as "communicatively competent" if they demonstrate the ability to adjust to specific classroom requirements such as understanding directions, appreciating classroom rules, undertaking teacher designated assignments and carrying out "tasks". Teachers tend also to perceive this kind of communicative competence - or incompetence - as being linked with intellectual capacity.

When one considers the obvious corollary of spending more time on adult-directed activities ensures that our peers-oriented child care graduates will have less time to spend in elaborate exchanges with their age-mates, which, up to this stage of the child's development, have been a major source of learning, enjoyment and satisfaction, then there is an obvious need to ensure that the transition from child care centre to school is as smooth as possible, with a positive demonstration of a child-centred environment, program and teacher behaviour in the ~~final~~^{first} year of the primary school.

These students have important ramifications for teachers in the beginning class of a primary school;

1. more and more children are exposed to group experiences prior to school and the number is likely to rise. Howes (1988) has suggested that a history of child care can influence, and continue to influence, school behaviour even after exposure to three years of high quality primary school. However she makes a further point that in terms of predicting school success, enrolment in child care per se is not as important a predictor as the quality and stability of the child care; for instance, a child who has experienced many changes in alternative caregivers and child care settings may, in the extreme, distrust all caregivers and cease to enter into new trusting relationships with adults, or alternatively, children who have been exposed to poor quality child care settings, may, because of large groupings of children, poor adult-child ratios on exposure to caregivers who lack a basic knowledge of child development, may fail to receive sufficient individualised and responsive attention and as a result they may be unable to form positive relationships with adults, including their beginning school teacher.
2. On a more positive note, children who are exposed to prolonged group

experiences prior to entering school may be perceived as being more confident and assertive, rather than submissive. However teachers should not confuse assertive and aggressive behaviour but utilise this behaviour in learning experiences which will form a basis for further developing the child's literacy, oracy and numeracy skills, e.g. by providing activities which make sense to the children, by offering meaningful communication with adults, by planning for challenging shared experiences with peers and by recognising the learning potential of many typical preschool experiences which have in the past been normally regarded as "play", and by withstanding pressure from parents and administrators to "teach the basics". (Clark, 1988).

The task for teachers of the beginning grades will be to harness the positive skills of the graduates of child care centres, to appreciate their sophisticated negotiating skills and to ensure that are they offered adult interaction which stimulates rather stifles in an atmosphere of co-operation, co-ordination and continuity.

It is interesting that these key words - "co-operation", "co-ordination" and "continuity" as well as "child care centre" all begin with the same letter of the alphabet; hopefully primary school teachers will appreciate the connections.

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